

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 3, 2020

Hon. Tiffany P. Robinson
Secretary
Maryland Department of Labor
500 North Calvert St.
Baltimore, MD 21202-3651

Dear Secretary Robinson:

In light of FEMA's approval of Maryland's application to distribute an additional \$300 in weekly unemployment benefits, we write to urge you to give the highest priority to assisting claimants whose applications for benefits have not yet been resolved. Many of these claimants have never been contacted by the Department, are awaiting interviews by agency representatives, or are otherwise awaiting resolution of questions about their applications. The situation for many is dire.

When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in the United States, Congress acted quickly to provide unprecedented UI assistance to workers – and to states charged with processing UI claims – given the impact of the pandemic on businesses, employees, and the economy overall. Although the CARES Act was enacted on March 27, 2020, many Marylanders who are eligible for unemployment assistance under that legislation still have yet to receive much-needed help during this crisis.

Despite recent statements by Governor Hogan that the backlog has been cleared,¹ we continue to hear daily from constituents who haven't received benefits. Indeed, some of these constituents applied more than four months ago but have yet to be contacted by your agency. Since April 1, 2020, Maryland has adjudicated only 13.9% of eligibility issues within 21 days, a level of performance exceeded by 47 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.²

Based on status updates from the Maryland Department of Labor that our offices receive and discussions with our constituents, one of the largest sources of delays in claimants receiving their payments is the backlog of fact-finding interviews. Constituents have reported that they have had to wait eight weeks or more for an interview before payments can be released. While we are aware that these fact-finding interviews are a requirement for the issuance of unemployment benefits, it is imperative that additional staff be allocated to conducting these interviews so that payments can finally be released to deserving claimants.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/maryland-unemployment-scandal/2020/07/15/8e7a72ea-c6b4-11ea-a99f-3bbdffb1af38_story.html

² <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/ranking.asp>, Run Date: August 31, 2020.

Since enactment of the CARES Act, our offices have helped thousands of Marylanders obtain the benefits for which they are eligible. Now, more than five months later, we continue to assist hundreds of claimants who have either never received a response from the Maryland Department of Labor or have unresolved cases that are simply languishing. Given the dire financial circumstances in which these Marylanders find themselves, through no fault of their own, it is imperative that their claims be resolved as expeditiously as possible.

The expanded unemployment benefits included in the CARES Act have provided a lifeline for families who have been able to access them and allowed them to keep their lights on, keep a roof over their heads, and feed their families. However, we continue to hear -- on a daily basis -- from constituents who are unable to put food on the table and are facing eviction due to a job loss caused by the pandemic and delays in receiving unemployment benefits. Many of them have spent hundreds of hours on hold waiting for an MDOL representative to assist them but remain unable to have their case resolved.

Here is an example of the experience of one Marylander who is still waiting for help:

I have been extremely patient SINCE APRIL. I figured I had a bit of savings and other people would need help before me. However, I never imagined that I would have to go 16 WEEKS without assistance. I can no longer wait, I need my benefits now or will not be able to pay my rent after this month nor will I have grocery money. I call unemployment nearly every morning at 7am when the phone lines open only to be told they are overloaded and to call later. I have emailed their help line. I have tried to auto-generated texting and chat help. There is no way to get through. I have been working multiple jobs at a time since I turned 16, I vote, I pay my taxes. All I am asking is that you hold up your end of the deal and help me get the money that I have paid into this system to help me in my time of need. 109 DAYS WITHOUT ANY HELP IS UNACCEPTABLE.”

Another constituent reports as follows:

“I was feeling badly this past weekend and actually went into my local hospital. My blood pressure was through the roof. It has been confirmed for a while now that I am eligible for PUA benefits. However, they informed me there is an error code that required a phone interview that could take up to 10 weeks. My landlord has given me a date to have July and August rent; if not provided, my children and I will be out of a home. They both start school Monday.”

There are thousands of Marylanders with similar stories.

As you begin planning for the distribution of the additional income replacement approved by FEMA, we urge you to prioritize providing relief to claimants who have been waiting months to receive their UI benefits. We are committed to working with your Department to help deliver urgently-needed relief to Marylanders facing unemployment and economic hardships not seen since the Great Depression.

Sincerely,

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Steny H. Hoyer
Member of Congress

/s/ C.A. "Dutch" Ruppersberger
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

/s/ John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress

/s/ Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

/s/ David J. Trone
Member of Congress

/s/ Kweisi Mfume
Member of Congress